

Message from Jim Rex

Dear Friends,

I'm using my EdReach space this week to share with you the contents of a letter that I sent to each member of the South Carolina General Assembly yesterday regarding our efforts to refine accountability for maximum results with minimum testing.

There has been considerable confusion - and considerable misinformation - surrounding the delayed filing of legislation designed to update and improve South Carolina's student assessment and accountability systems.

The provisions in this legislative proposal, drafted by House Education Committee Chairman Bob Walker, are the result of recommendations from two statewide task forces I appointed last summer - one for testing and one for accountability. These groups included representatives from local districts and schools, teacher and school administrator organizations, the South Carolina School Boards Association, the General Assembly, the Education Oversight Committee, the State Board of Education, business groups, and colleges and universities. Over the summer and fall, these two groups spent many hours discussing ways to improve South Carolina's testing and accountability systems.

First and foremost, our goal is to change the way we test students. I'm sure you have heard from parents, teachers and constituents who want to replace PACT tests with a more effective assessment tool. PACT results provide little useful information for teachers to use during the school year, they lack details on individual student strengths and weaknesses, and they don't arrive until summer's end.

The proposal would do two things with testing: It would get better end-of-year accountability test results back to schools much quicker, and it would expand and enhance "diagnostic" tests so that they are available for all grades statewide in math, English, science and social studies. These tests will be instructional tools that get vital information to teachers while they can still use it to help students.

Negative comments about the task force recommendations have focused mainly on proposed changes to the labels we assign to schools on their annual report cards - particularly the suggestion that we change the "Unsatisfactory" rating to "Academic Priority."

This recommendation is not made lightly. And it is not - as some have suggested - a way to hide poor school performance or "make bad schools look good." Rather, it is a good-faith attempt to craft a rating system that does more than just assign ratings - a system that actually helps schools improve.

The original thinking behind the Education Accountability Act was that calling a school "Unsatisfactory" would generate constructive support for change within a school and its surrounding community. But that hasn't happened. Unsatisfactory-rated schools - all of

which have high concentrations of poverty - have a hard time retaining teachers and an even harder time attracting new ones. Teachers who do stick around for any length of time typically suffer from low morale.

If our 10 years of experience with the EAA is any guide, merely labeling a school as Unsatisfactory is not likely to improve it. The idea behind "Academic Priority" is to use that rating as a better starting point toward positive momentum and constructive change. Other states have adopted similar terminology as part of their accountability systems.

Last year I created a collaborative initiative involving 16 of South Carolina's lowest-rated schools, which have an average poverty rating of 93 percent. The group is called the Palmetto Priority Schools, and we are currently halfway through the first year of working together. Morale among teachers and staff, and also among community members and business leaders - is dramatically improved. For the first time, they seem to believe that "the system" is actually trying to help them and not just label them as bad schools.

It may seem that simply calling these schools "priority schools" is inconsequential, but I believe it has been an important and symbolic first step. To be sure, this collaborative involves much more than revised terminology. If these schools are to succeed, they must generate creativity, determination, hard work, and lots of community support.

I look forward to talking with you about how we can improve student testing in South Carolina, and also how we might improve our state's landmark school accountability legislation. The sooner we begin legislative deliberations, the sooner we can have reasoned discussions that are free of the distortions and outright falsehoods that have circulated this week on Internet blogs.

Above all, rest assured that I am absolutely committed to maintaining the spirit and goals of the EAA, which has driven significant improvements in our public schools since it was passed a decade ago. We need to give our teachers better classroom tools that will make them more effective. And we need to strengthen the EAA, not dismantle it.

Sincerely,

Jim Rex
State Superintendent of Education